

## Ritual House Posts, and "House Societies" in Polynesia: Modeling Inter- and Intra- Household Variability\*

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A recent paper by Kahn and Coil (2006), published data on intra-site variation in late prehistoric Society Island house structures, focusing on the raw materials used to fashion house posts. Variation in the woods used to construct posts differed both by site function and socioeconomic status of the occupants. House sites serving as elite dwellings or those used for specialized, ritual activities were constructed from ritually charged and economically valued tree species, while lower status sleeping houses were made from common tree species that lacked ritual or cosmological associations. This pattern was linked to the creation of sacred spaces on the landscape for a well-defined ritual and social elite who controlled many key aspects of agricultural production and the ritual calendar in the late prehistoric Society Island chiefdoms.

Thus, the wood types used to construct significant architectural elements of house structures, such as house posts, can have broad ramifications for Polynesian archaeology. In this paper, ethnohistorical and archaeological data for Polynesian house posts are reviewed, including size and shape, raw materials used in their construction, post emplacement practices, and evidence for their role in domestic ritual. Contemporary household archaeology studies in Polynesia and elsewhere share an innovative view of dwellings, arguing that house structures had both functional, ideational, and ritual meaning and that their architectural elements had social and cosmological import (Kahn 2005; Kirch 1996; Kirch and Sahlin 1992; Ladefoged 1998; Sutton 1990, 1991; Weisler and Kirch 1985; Oakes 1994; see also Deetz 1982; Marshall 2000; Meskell 1998; Robin 2003; Skyes 1989). Following from this, I argue that variation in the architectural elements of houses, including the woods used to fashion house posts and the form and morphology of house post layout, can have social relevance.

Using the "house society" theoretical perspective, I will elaborate on this theme. Diverse ethnographic and ethnohistoric data illustrate the spiritual significance of house posts in modern Austronesian societies, particularly their roles as ritual attractors. This ethnographic data is used as an analogy for exploring whether or not prehistoric Polynesian societies, whose members spoke languages belonging to the Austronesian family and who are regarded as ancient "*societies à maison*," shared the cultural idea of house posts as ritual attractors. The main body of the paper reconstructs the myriad of ways in which the ritual treatment of house posts was expressed in Polynesia at the time of European contact and in the historic era. The material nature of house posts in four prehistoric Eastern Polynesian societies

(Society Islands, Marquesas Islands, Hawaiian Islands, and New Zealand) is reconstructed by examining the available and relevant archaeological data and hypotheses to be tested with future work are proposed. I close by turning to the archaeological implications of this data, specifically how greater attention to house post variation — either through detailed excavation recording techniques and/or wood charcoal identifications of charred wood fragments in posthole fill — can be used as evidence for interpreting the social significance of inter- and intra-household variation in Polynesia.

### HOUSE POSTS AS RITUAL ATTRACTORS IN AUSTRONESIAN "HOUSE SOCIETIES"

Lévi-Strauss introduced the concept of the "house" as a social structure, or corporate body, holding a landed estate made up of material and immaterial wealth, and perpetuated through the transmissions of rights, names, goods, or privileges (1979:45, 51). Indonesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, were among the areas where Lévi-Strauss argued that cultures were organized as "house societies". In modern Austronesian-speaking cultures of Oceania and island Southeast Asia, the role of "houses" as social groups is well-documented (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995a; Fox 1993a; Macdonald 1987; McKinnon 1991, 1995; Reuter 2002; Waterson 1990). These studies illustrate how dwellings and the daily activities carried out in or around them, such as food preparation, food sharing, feasting, and gift exchange, have ritual and symbolic meaning. In modern Austronesian "house societies" architectonic features, including architectural elaboration and spatial layout of house structures, temples, and communities, often represent facets of social differentiation linked to hierarchical rank, social status, and wealth and gender difference (Fox 1995; McKinnon 1991; 2000; Parmentier 1987; Reuter 2002; Waterson 1990; see also Firth 1957).

Arguments have been put forth that Lapita cultures were organized as "house societies" (Chiu 2005; Green 2002; Kirch 1997; Kirch and Green 1987, 2001) and that ancestral social groupings within Polynesia dating to c. 2600-2000 BP (Ancestral Polynesian Society or APS) are best interpreted as "house societies" (Kirch and Green 2001:201-218). To date, these studies have relied heavily on linguistic reconstruction and a somewhat thin archaeological record, as we lack large scale excavations of Lapita or APS residential sites. Green (1998, 2002) has reviewed both archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence that ancient

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Samoan societies were organized around the “house,” while Tcherkézoff (in press) has made a similar argument for modern Samoa. Proto-historic Tokelau societies can also be interpreted as an examples of Polynesian “house societies” (see Green and Green 2007:238), while Kirch (1996) has highlighted the importance of the “house” at multiple scales of social organization in Tikopia, a Polynesian Outlier. However, it is in Eastern Polynesia that archaeologists have utilized the material record in addition to ethnohistoric and linguistic evidence to argue most convincingly for the presence of ancient “*societies à maison*.” Examples include case studies from Hawai’i (Anderson 2001); the Society Islands (Kahn 2005, 2007; Kahn and Kirch 2003); and New Zealand and the Cook Islands (Walter 2004). As Polynesia was settled, we can expect the “house”-based APS societies to have diverged along local pathways, retaining some key or basic components of social organization centered on the “house,” while transforming or losing others.

A common characteristic of ethnographically studied Austronesian “house societies” is that features of buildings serve symbolic rather than purely functional purposes. This is because the material construction and layout of the physical house articulate the dwelling with symbolism and ritual meaning (Kirch 1996; Waterson 1990:91). Ethnographic and linguistic data from Austronesian “house societies” describe house posts as “ritual attractors,” significant features or points of reference around which key activities are organized (Fox 1993b; Green 1998; Kirch and Green 2001; Meijl 1993; Sather 1993). Commonly found in domestic contexts as embodiments of deities or having cosmological or spiritual references, ritual attractors are durable to semi-durable features (posts, altars, etc.) with intensified ritual focus (Adams 2007; Gillespie 2007; Heitman 2007; Kahn 2007). Cross-culturally, ceremonies associated with ritual attractors enhance their role as repositories for maintaining, holding, and augmenting the tangible and intangible property of the “house” (Gillespie 2007; Helms 2007). In Polynesia, the use of ritual attractors or other cosmological features also provides social continuity in residential architecture, linking the dwelling structure and the social group (the “house”) with the ancestors (Kahn 2007).

In many Austronesian societies, the importance of house posts as ritual attractors is clearly based on their close association with the ancestors and their metaphoric representation as pathways within which the gods descended (McKinnon 1991:94, n12; Waterson 1990:124). House posts, and the timber used to fashion them, legitimated the households’ status in a symbolic manner, symbolizing the seats of the gods and ancestors. There is also some indication that the insignia used to decorate houses posts had important ritual implications, as senior and junior family lines had different rights to ridge pole insignia (carved and decorated post façades) (Waterson 1990:34). McKinnon (1991:98-99) notes that in Tanimbar, ridge poles were more elaborately carved and decorated in named houses, while unnamed houses only had access to smaller carving motifs. The ethnographic data also highlight that the materiality of

house posts, including the types of woods used in their construction and their elaboration, through carving or other decoration, varies according to “house” rank. Drawing from this, I hypothesize that in ancient Polynesian dwelling structures, house posts served, in part, as material representations of the “house’s” socio-economic, political, and spiritual status (much in the same way that face motifs on Lapita pottery may have functioned, after Chiu 2005), in addition to functioning as symbols of venerated ancestors and as genealogical markers (see below).

The social significance of Austronesian house posts, particularly their embodiment of ancestors, is highlighted in domestic rituals in which posts play a central part. Varied Austronesian “opening the house” rituals focus on house posts as important architectural features or ritual attractors. Posts are “ritually planted” during house construction or are provided offerings during household rites (Bloch 1995:81-82; Carsten 1995:111; Waterson 1990:124-125). In highland Bali societies, the ancestors are called to live as guardian spirits within the dwelling structure, once the first house post has been erected and offerings are made at its base (Reuter 2002:262). In a similar manner, Gibson (1995:139-140, 141-143) describes how Ari dwellings are constructed under the supervision of ritual specialists. After conferring with the ancestors and spirits, the specialists choose the tree trunks to be cut down and incorporated into the house as posts, beams, and ridge poles. Particular care is taken in fashioning the house posts and in their emplacement.

Thus, in modern Austronesian house societies, house posts can represent the ancestors, deities, or spirits and serve as important ritual attractors within daily life and in varied domestic ceremonies. As material embodiments of ritual strength, we can view Austronesian house posts as more than functional objects - they also serve as ritual objects and status symbols, forming parts of ritual landscapes and embodying kin labor and identity.

## THE ROLE OF HOUSE POSTS IN POLYNESIAN SOCIETIES

Green (2002:264) has argued that, in the Eastern Lapita Complex (c. 3000-3200 BP), ritual style dwellings had four important ritual attractors, one of which was the main post. All Polynesian cultures derive a common ancestry from Lapita (Kirch 2000). With the settlement of Western Polynesia, and later movement into Eastern Polynesia, these “house societies” diverged into local contexts, thus, one may expect that the common origins in housing to appear as remnants in architectural features and cultural attitudes towards dwellings. \**Pou*, the PPN phoneme for house post can be reconstructed to Proto-Eastern Oceanic (\**mpou* “post”). It is found widely in Polynesian languages and Fijian, referring to a post or house center post (see Green 1998:264). Kirch and Green (2001:254) have advanced an ethnographic hypothesis that the PPN \**pou* served as a general term for post, but may also apply to posts or stone up-

rights "regarded as representations (or temporary receptacles) of the deities".

We can anticipate that, with the settlement of Polynesia, the particular material or spiritual treatment of house posts might diverge from culture to culture, while the general theme - house posts treated as embodiments of the gods/ancestors/deities/spirits - may be retained. Using ethnographic analogy and reading the ethnohistoric sources through the lens of the House Society approach, I pose the questions - did Polynesian societies share the basic cultural notion of the ritual nature of house posts found in other Austronesian "house societies" and, if so, how can this be used to interpret prehistoric social organization in these societies? Second, I explore how these notions may have been expressed and materialized *locally* in Polynesian contexts, whether in post emplacement practices, post size, post material (i.e., type of wood), decorative techniques, and evidence for ritual offerings. Finally, I discuss the archaeological implications of this data for carrying out household archaeology in the region.

### *Ethnographic, Ethnohistoric, and Archaeological Data from Select Case Studies*

I begin with a discussion of Tikopia, a Polynesian Outlier, where Firth's ethnographic materials (1940, 1957, 1967, 1970) and Kirch's later observations (1996) provide detailed descriptions of house features and their association with ceremonial activities. Eastern Polynesian societies lack robust ethnographic studies and house posts are referenced minimally in many accounts. I focus on four Eastern Polynesian societies, the Society Islands, the Marquesas Islands, the Hawaiian Islands, and New Zealand, case studies with strong ethnohistoric data and/or available archaeological data, although references to the sacred nature of house posts and/or embellished house posts are found throughout Oceania. A wider reaching ethnohistoric review will undoubtedly reveal more data<sup>1</sup>.

The Eastern Polynesia examples necessitate a holistic use of the ethnohistoric records, as few early sources (early European explorer accounts) refer to cultural concepts of dwellings or house based rituals, nor do they specifically mention house posts.

Information can often be found in later missionary accounts, legends, and creation myths recorded in the post-contact era, native lexicons, and post-contact ethnographies. Thus, data must be drawn from a wide body of source types ranging from different post-contact periods, including early and late European explorer accounts, missionary accounts, traditional accounts (oral histories, chants, legends, myths, and genealogies), memory ethnographies, and early language lexicons. These source types are critically reviewed in Kahn (2005).

<sup>1</sup> For example, Green (1998:264) describes data for house posts as ritual attractors in Samoa and other parts of Western Polynesia. Kirch (1994:262) also provides an ethnohistoric example for posts as ritual attractors in a Futunan paramount chief's residence. There, posts demarcated sacred spaces and the main supporting post was viewed as a god's dwelling.

### *Tikopia (Polynesian Outlier)*

In varied contexts (temples, houses, canoe sheds), Tikopian posts are described as both symbols and embodiments of ancestors, ancestral deities, and spirits (Table 1). Particular posts are named for, or belong to, gods (*atua*) linked to particular lineages, often chiefly lineages (Firth 1940:64, 96, 101; 1970:116, 126). Spirits may inhabit posts (Firth 1930-31:303) or be embodied as carved figures on posts and there are clear references to posts having spiritual involvement (Firth 1970:221, 338) analogous to ritual attractors.

Posts and rafters of the sacred temple house are decorated with bark cloth and leaves, representing offerings to the gods (Firth 1940:164; 1967:211-213) and dedications to the spirits which inhabit them. Decorating posts and rafters with pigment is an acknowledgement of spirit assistance in the major ritual cycle "The Work of the Gods" (Firth 1967:454-5) and sacred offerings are often left at the base of temple posts (Firth 1940:98; Table 1). Posts in sacred temples symbolize a clan's sacred rites and ritual power.

Within Tikopian domestic contexts, house post use is linked to "certain prescribed social categories" (Kirch 1996:262) and the materialization of social rank (Firth 1957:81; Table 1). Firth (1970:126) notes that "centre post [s] or rafter[s] or stone...were symbols of ownership, of control, of power". When a chief enters a house, he is given a "seat of honor with his back to a post" (Firth 1970:40). In daily use, a post is reserved as a backrest for the headman of the house, while others are used for important male visitors or the eldest son, and yet others for the remaining sons, in rank order. Larger, older, or high-ranking households leave one post unused as a backrest, where offerings to "ancestors and lineage gods" are placed (Kirch 1996:262; see Firth 1957:77, 81).

Most of the Tikopian descriptions mention particular treatment of posts during ceremonies (i.e., ritual offerings, decoration with pigment or vegetation, etc.), rather than their fabrication from sacred woods (Tables 1, 2). There is some indication that the most sacred center post within houses was the largest in size. Descriptions of canoe shed posts refer to stones found when the posts are dug, which are then left in place and are felt to embody spirits (Firth 1967). Whether this refers to natural stones encountered when the post is dug or refers to past practices of placing stones in postholes as ritual offerings is difficult to distinguish, as is whether similar practices were associated with house posts.

### *Society Islands (Central Eastern Polynesia)*

Ethnohistoric and archaeological data for Ma'ohi house posts have been reviewed elsewhere (Kahn and Coil



Table 1. Ethnohistoric and Ethnographic Data for House Posts as Ritual Attractors and Material Symbols of Wealth and Status

| Location          | Symbolize / Embody Ancestors, Deities, Spirits          | Involved in Domestic Ritual  | Sign of Ownership, Control, Power                            |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| Tikopia           | Ancestors   | Decorative treatment<br>Offerings  | Named posts used as backrests (social rank)                  |
| Society Islands   | Deities   | Decorative treatment<br>Offerings<br>Dedication ritual<br>House opening ceremony | Post size<br>Polishing, carving, dyeing, wrapping with cloth |
| Marquesas Islands | Sacred body parts of high status or wealthy individuals | Decorative treatment<br>Dedication ritual<br>House opening ceremony              | <i>Tiki</i> carvings, lashings                               |
| Hawaiian Islands  | ?   | Decorative treatment<br>Offerings<br>Dedication rituals                          | Named ridge post<br>Dressed posts                            |
| New Zealand       | <i>Mauri</i> (life force)                               | Decorative treatment   | Carved with human figures, red pigment (central posts)       |

2006) and the data are briefly summarized here. The ritual nature of Ma'ohi houses is expressed through metaphorical associations of high ranking dwellings and *marae* (ancestral temples), the most telling of which is this passage from Henry (1928:150-151): "The house of a great man became his *marae*... From this circumstance arose these words: Beware of the front door of my house, my house is my *marae*, the front door has the front step...."

Origin myths recorded in the early 1800's refer to the creation of the first god's house and other house structures. These creation chants draw attention to the spiritual nature of the ridge pole and other house posts (termed pillars); posts were created by, and embodied the form of, the creator god, Ta'aroa<sup>2</sup>.

...Ta'aroa was a god's house; his backbone was the ridgepole, his ribs were the supporters... (Henry 1928:336, f1; Dictated in 1822 by counselors and high priests of Porapora and Mo'orea).

Ta'aroa fixed the dome of the sky, the shell Rumi, upon pillars. He said 'O Tumu-nui and Paparahara, bring forth pillars, let there be a front pillar, let there be a front pillar and a back pillar.' And there were brought forth pillars; Hotu-i-te-ra'i (Fruitfulness of the sky or Life-Supporting Tree) for a front pillar, and Ana-feo (Coral Aster) for a back pillar.... and there were the pillar to stand by, the pillar to sit by, the pillar to blacken by, the pillar to debate by, the elocution pillar, and the pillar to exit ... (Henry 1928:342-343, f.

23; Recited in 1822 by High Priests of Pora Pora and Tahiti).

Varied forms of decorative treatment drawing attention to Society Island house posts (polishing, carving, dyeing, wrapping in cordage or barkcloth, or their large size) are described in the early European voyager accounts (Beaglehole 1962(I):364; Morrison 1966: 163-164). Missionary texts and the earliest Tahitian lexicon also illustrate ritual ceremonies concerning house posts. Dedication rituals at the end of house construction or the opening of a new house, particularly elite residences and houses of specialized ritual function situated near *marae*, included the ritual planting of posts, chanting of prayers, and elaborate decoration of mid-line and end posts with colored matting and cordage<sup>3</sup> (Davies Journal 1808-24 February 1810; cited in Newbury 1961:127-128). Ritual cleansing and "opening" ceremonies for newly constructed dwellings are common in modern Austronesian "house societies". They underlie the ritual nature of the house structure and its embodiment as an animate, living entity with its own life force (Gibson 1995:139-145; Reuter 2002:263; Waterson 1993:223-4). These practices are also analogous to those recorded in modern Austronesian "house societies" where posts serve as ritual attractors. Overall, the ethnohistoric accounts suggest that post size and post decoration were important material symbols of household rank and status in protohistoric Ma'ohi society.

Archaeological data support that house posts in late prehistoric Ma'ohi houses had ritual import in addition to

<sup>2</sup> Similar creation myths are found in the Tuamotu Islands. Stimson (ms. cited in Beckwith 1970) recorded a Tuamotuan legend of two demi-gods (Mamo and Rigorigo), where the eyes of one are plucked out and used as lamps and the body is used as a post to support the house.

<sup>3</sup> *Fata*, storage posts within or outside the house or scaffolding for platforms where offerings were left for the gods in the Society Islands, also had spiritual significance (Ellis 1831:192) and were emplaced in a ritual manner with stones in sacred *miro* leaves (Henry 1928:135).

Table 2. Data on House Post/Posthole Form and Morphology.

Ethnographic or ethnohistoric evidence is coded as (E), archaeological evidence is coded as (A). The information presented for Tikopia is based on ethnographic data because archaeological data are unavailable. "Data unavailable" is listed when both archaeological and ethno-historical data were unavailable.

|                   | Posthole Size/Shape   | Offerings in Posthole   | Raw Material   |
|-------------------|---|---|--|
| Tikopia           | Central post largest? (E)   | Stones? (E)   | Data Unavailable   |
| Society Islands   | Mid-line, central posts largest (A)<br>(particularly specialized houses for ritual activities and elite houses) | Pits suggest post emplacement ceremonies (A, E) Stones? (E, A)<br>Organic (E) | Breadfruit (A)<br>High status houses: other sacred and/or valued woods<br>Low status houses: common woods-low status (E)   |
| Marquesas Islands | Data unavailable  | Data Unavailable  | High Status Houses: Breadfruit (posts), Palm or Coconut (ridge pole) (E)   |
| Hawaiian Islands  | Variation suggested (A)   | Organic, under main post (E)<br>Support stones, in corner posts (A)?          | Mountain apple (corner post?) (A)<br>Same wood type used for all posts and all rafters (E)   |
| New Zealand       | Superior houses-dressed posts (square/rectangular)<br>Common houses- unshaped posts (round) (E, A)              | Organic (dog jaw bone), under central posts (A)                               | "Superior" sculpted houses: Tōtara (E, A), Pukatea (A)<br>Pole/Thatch houses or dressed timber houses lacking sculpted elements: wider variety of wood types (A) |

functional purpose. That both round-ended houses and some rectangular houses have mid-line postholes bigger than the rest (Davidson 1967:125-127, 138; Kahn 2005) draws attention to the correlation between house size, roof height (and therefore house height), post diameter, and the size of the trunk used, these correlations are also noted in the ethnohistoric accounts (Orliac 1982:273; Sparrman 1944:73). Central posts formed the key load bearing supports in Ma'ohi houses (and indeed most pre-contact Polynesian houses) and can then be expected to be larger than other posts. However, prehistoric Ma'ohi houses interpreted as specialized house sites for ritual activities (Sites

120 ALT/B, 123, see Figure 1) and elite residential sleeping houses (170) have larger postholes than those interpreted as commoner houses (171B, 171C) and some commoner houses lack mid-line house posts that are larger than the side posts (Oakes 1994), illustrating that post size is more than a purely functional attribute.

In a recent study of late prehistoric 'Opunohu Valley house sites (Kahn 2005), careful excavation documented numerous postholes associated with pits and/or surrounded by packing clay and support stones. Because a surprising number of medium- to large postholes were associated with pits and their constellation suggested they were dug when the original post was placed, I argue these practices likely represent post emplacement rituals, similar to those mentioned in the ethnohistoric accounts (Ellis 1831; Orliac 1982:273). While post replacement activities were, in part, necessitated by post rot, the act of replacing a Ma'ohi house post likely had ritual connotations given the Austronesian-wide importance of house posts as symbols of the ancestors and "house" growth (Bloch 1995:81-82; Carsten 1995:111; Firth 1967:198-199; Kirch 1996:262; Malo 1951:124, s.4; Waterson 1990:124-125). Excavations at other 'Opunohu Valley house sites (Green et al. 1967:132-133; Oakes 1994) and in Tahiti (Orliac 1982:273) have found a similar association of pit features with internal postholes, suggesting a practice of ritual emplacement of posts within postholes.

Table 3. Scientific and Common Names for Select Wood Taxa

| Taxa                           | Common Names   |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Artocarpus</i> sp.          | Breadfruit; 'Uru (Societies), Kuru (Marquesas)                   |
| <i>Calophyllum inophyllum</i>  | 'Ati (Societies), Tamanu (Societies, Marquesas)                  |
| <i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i>      | Hibiscus; Pūrau (Societies), 'Au (Marquesas)                     |
| <i>Inocarpus fagifer</i>       | Tahitian Chestnut; Mape (Societies)                              |
| <i>Ficus prolixa</i>           | Banyan; 'Ora (Societies), Aoa (Marquesas)                        |
| <i>Cordia subcordata</i>       | Tou (Societies, Marquesas)                                       |
| <i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i> | Ironwood; 'Aito, Toa (Societies)                                 |
| <i>Thespesia populnea</i>      | Pacific Rosewood; 'Amae (Societies), Miro (Societies, Marquesas) |
| <i>Cocos nucifera</i>          | Coconut; Niu (Societies), Nū (Marquesas)                         |
| <i>Metrosideros polymorpha</i> | 'Ohi'a lehua (Hawai'i)   |
| <i>Syzygium mallaccense</i>    | Mountain apple; 'Ohi'a ai (Hawai'i)                              |
| <i>Podocarpus totara</i>       | Tōtara (New Zealand)   |

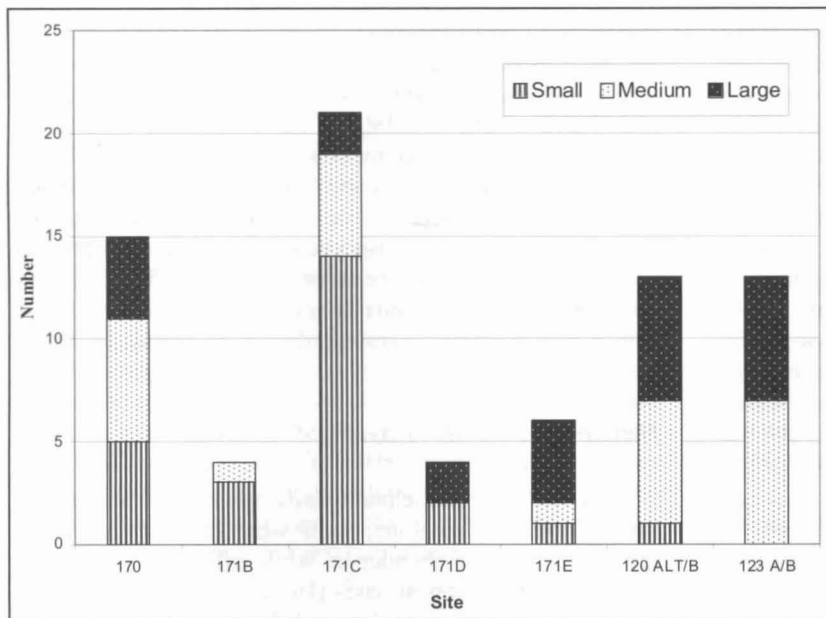


Figure 1. Posthole sizes for recently excavated 'Opunohu Valley house sites (after Kahn 2005, Table 5.20). Postholes recovered in late prehistoric Society Island excavations have been classified into three basic size categories: small (10-16 cm diameter, or less than 16 cm diameter); medium (16-26 cm diameter), and large (26-40 cm diameter).

Finally, there is convincing archaeological evidence that in certain Society Island contexts, house posts were fashioned from sacred woods<sup>4</sup> (Kahn and Coil 2006; Table 2). In a small sample of excavated 'Opunohu Valley house sites, only specialized house sites (ScMo-120B, ScMo-123) used for sacred activities and high status elite residences (ScMo-170) had house posts fashioned from breadfruit (*Artocarpus atilis*) wood, an economically important and symbolically charged tree species (Table 3). In contrast, the lower-status sleeping house (ScMo-171B), had posts constructed from *purau* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) and *mape* (*Inocarpus fagifer*), widely available, commonly used woods lacking symbolic properties or great economic value. These archaeological data confirm practices briefly mentioned in the historic texts which note how branches from sacred trees were used in a ritualized manner to carve ceremonial idols and to fashion posts for constructing *fare 'aroi* (specialized meeting houses), elite residences, and offering platforms situated on ceremonial temple sites (Emory 1933:23; Henry 1928:382; see Orliac 1984b, 1990; Orliac and Watez 1987). They also provide confirmation that ritually important, sacred, or economically valued

woods used in house construction signal site function, rank, and status, and in particular, the sanctity of the occupants living in, or carrying out ritual and craft activities in and around the house structures (Kahn 2005; Kahn and Coil 2006; Orliac 2000).

### Marquesas Islands (Central Eastern Polynesia)

The ritual nature of Marquesan houses is likewise illustrated in the ethnographic and ethno-historic literature. In the post-contact period, Handy (1923) notes that specialists or master builders supervised the building of Marquesan house platforms (*paepae*), in addition to supervising the building of *me'ae* (temples) and other ritual structures. Langsdorff's earlier account (1813:129) described how newly-built Marquesan houses were opened with consecration ceremonies carried out by "priests or magicians" and were accompanied by feasts and orations, suggesting that the completion, if not the debut, of house construction was a ritually formalized affair<sup>5</sup>. For first-born sons of chiefs or men of wealth, house consecration and

opening ceremonies involved decoration of the house interior, whereby a symbolic loin cloth (*hami*) of sacred red and white bark cloth was tied around the house ridge pole. Handy (1923:79-80) argues that this loincloth symbolized the *mana* and strength of the dwelling structure, much in the same way that the *tapu* loincloth surrounding the loins of the first born son represented his virility and power. In this way, elite Marquesan houses personified living bodies and were treated in a symbolic manner as individuals with a high degree of sacredness. That dwellings were named individually, as with other important and often sacred possessions (canoes, weapons) underscores their social importance (Handy 1923:61, 86).

While ethnohistoric sources do not specifically link Marquesan posts to the ancestors or deities, posts were adorned or given special treatment during rituals in both house and temple contexts (Table 1). European Explorers described temple (*me'ae*) posts and those found in "public houses" situated near dance/feasting grounds (*tohua*) as elaborately decorated with vegetation and bound with tapa cloth streamers (Krusenstern 1813[1968]: 127; Porter

<sup>4</sup> Symbolically charged tree species are found throughout Polynesia and their woods often played important roles in rituals. Their sacred properties derived from diverse sources – some trees were affiliated with particular deities, while others were planted in or near temple sites and attracted sacred birds that were themselves considered emanations of the gods and spirits (see discussion in Kahn and Coil 2006; Kolb and Murakami 1994; Orliac 1984b, 1990; Orliac and Watez 1987, among others). Sacred woods were often highly valued and used to fabricate ritually significant objects (canoes, house posts, temple superstructures, temple idols, etc.). Ethnohistoric sources and native lexicons are invaluable source materials in the region for determining which particular tree species were considered sacred for particular island groups.

<sup>5</sup> Handy's later account (1923) argues that the *tuhuna* who laid the first course of stone in Marquesan *paepae* construction served simply as master builders rather than priests, while both Handy's and Langsdorff's (1813) accounts illustrate that ritual specialists directed house opening ceremonies.

1970:39-40; Terrell 1988). Crook describes the front house post as "wrapt with black and yellow sennet and sometimes bound with tapa cloth" (n.d.:cxxxiii); his early description of these practices during his missionary stay in the 1790s intimates that house post decoration displayed household economic resources and household rank. Late European explorer accounts (Porter 1970:39-40) and later ethnographic sources (Linton 1923:285-290, pl. XLIB,C; Handy 1923:154) refer to geometric and/or *tiki* figure carvings on the front and end house posts, as well as ornamental lashings, which were positioned to serve as a form of public display. *Tiki* figures found on house posts were similar to those carved on canoe bow and stern pieces (Handy 1923:159) and the men who carved designs on the front and end house posts were considered craft specialists (*tuhuna ha'a tikitiki*).

In chants given at the completion of a Marquesan house (Handy 1923), the raw materials used in the construction of a legendary house for Atanua, wife of Atea (the creator god), are personified, underscoring the ritual significance of the building materials. The chant references breadfruit wood used for the end posts and palm wood used for the ridge pole (Handy 1923:151-152; Table 1). In 1813, Porter (1970:39-40) noted that breadfruit wood was used to fashion house posts in "public houses" used by the elites adjacent to *tohua*, while well-polished coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) timbers were used for the ridge pole. Later accounts (Gracia 1843:123) similarly mention house posts fashioned from breadfruit, as were wooden *tiki* found in ritual temple contexts (Millerstrom 2001:35). In the Marquesas, breadfruit was the primary cultigen, and represents an economically important tree with significant ritual importance (Ellis 1831; Handy 1923; Ragone 1991). Banyan (*aoa*) was considered the most sacred tree (Handy 1923:120) and it was commonly planted on or near *me'ae* platforms (tribal ritual spaces), while ironwood (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) and *temanu* (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) could also be found in the sacred tree groves.

Limited archaeological evidence is available concerning the material form of prehistoric posts in the Marquesas Islands which reflects the lack of household archaeology carried out in this archipelago. Ottino and de Bergh (1990:8) provide a photo of an elaborately carved post with a *tiki* representation (date unknown) which was recovered from an elite funerary context, and possibly from a funerary platform<sup>6</sup>. A post (date unknown), fashioned from *tou* (*Cordia subcordata*) was recovered by the same authors at an elite funerary structure in Hakaohoka (1990:51-52). Orliac (1990:41) identified the wood from a house post on Nuku Hiva (M.H. n. 94-12-2) as breadfruit wood. From the

ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources we can infer that the use of banyan, *temanu*, ironwood, or breadfruit wood to fashion Marquesan house posts would strongly signal a sacred and/or elite dwelling or specialized use house in a public context. Additional archaeological work is needed to test whether certain Marquesan house posts were elaborated in their material form; this is often represented in the archaeological record as larger posts - either postholes with substantial diameter and/or substantial depth. The Marquesan ethnohistoric accounts suggest that the end posts of houses may have been larger and/or more highly decorated than the center posts.

### *Hawaiian Islands (Eastern Polynesia)*

In Hawai'i, late ethnohistoric texts describe how, at shrines dedicated to Kane, posts were featured in prayers spoken to promote abundance, while offerings wrapped in bundles were left at post bases (Handy 1972a:386). In other ritual contexts, including certain *heiau*, goddess figures and ancestral water spirits (*mo'o*) were represented by post images (Kamakau 1968: 85). As in other Polynesian societies, the construction of Hawaiian houses followed proscribed rules (Fornander 1919, Vol. 6:58-63, 78-81; Kamakau 1976:96), many of which involved the appearance and perfection of house posts. Particular care was taken in cutting timber for the main posts supporting the ridge pole and afterwards, strips of barkcloth were tied around each (Fornander 1919, Vol. 6:52). During construction rituals, the corner house posts were symbolically aligned (Fornander 1919, Vol. 6:60), leading Valeri (1985:280, 392 n. 106) to argue that contact period dwelling structures in Hawai'i signified social beings. Special attention was also paid to the ridge post; its name, *pou hana*, was a figure of speech to denote persons of importance and in house layout, this post was somewhat isolated from other posts (Table 1). Cross purlins were never attached to it, and it was only lashed at the top to the main ridge pole (Buck 1957:86). Organic offerings, such as fish or red taro, were placed under the main posts of a new sleeping house during consecration ceremonies (Handy 1972a:116, 1972b:177; Table 1). While Hawaiian sources do not refer to the symbolic embodiment of house posts as ancestors, deities, or gods, the involvement of house posts in domestic rituals strongly suggests that this notion was held. Similar to practices in the Marquesas, Hawaiian houses symbolized the human form and social relations<sup>7</sup>; in particular, the ridge pole represented the crest, hair, or helmet of high ranking males, the head of the family, the *ali'i*, or the priests (Valeri 1985:302-303).

<sup>6</sup> The authors note (1990:8) that the post is likely fashioned from breadfruit wood, but this is not based on wood identification analyses.

<sup>7</sup> Descriptions of Hawaiian house opening ceremonies also support the notion that the house structure corresponded to a human body. At these inaugural ceremonies, a thatch of grass hanging above the entryway, termed *piko* (also the term for navel) was ritually trimmed (Valeri 1985:302). This symbolized cutting the umbilical cord of the house, and as Valeri argues, the house was then "born like a human being" (1985:302, see Brigham 1908:103). This is analogous to many modern Austronesian "house societies" where "houses are frequently thought of as bodies, sharing with them a common anatomy and a common life history" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995b:3, see also Gibson 1995, Waterson 1990).



Posts were made of *uhiuhi*, *naio*, 'a'ali'i, *mamane*, *pua*, and other hard woods, while straight trees were selected for the rafters, such as 'ohi'a *hamau*, *lama*, *ha'a*, (Kamakau 1976:96; see also Kolb and Murakami 1994:65-67, Table 2). Some of the taxa used in house construction also had ritual use, including the genus *Metrosideros* (*o'hia lehua*), used for carving temple idols, temple house posts, and palisades (ibid.:67, see Fornander 1919, Vol. 6:12). The wood used in house construction was deemed ritually important (see Fornander 1919, Vol. 6, 58-63, 76-81) and Kamakau suggests that it was "not correct" and indeed, it was ritually inappropriate, to mix different woods in a house, thus all house posts should be of the same wood type, and the same was true for the rafters (Kamakau 1976:99). Buck (1957:83) notes that post thickness varied with house size; the height of the ridge posts determined the height of the house, and house height, like house size, depended upon the social position of the owners (see also Kamakau 1976:96; Stewart 1828:182). Wood used for house posts and house rafters was dressed in well-made houses (Kamakau 1976:98), suggesting that post decoration differed between high status and commoner houses.

While prehistoric house sites (or parts thereof) have been excavated within cultural-resource management projects, settlement pattern studies, and household archaeology projects, the Hawaiian Islands still lack an easily accessible database or publications with detailed reporting of house posthole size and morphology. An exception is site MO-A1-3, the Halawa Dune site on Moloka'i, where round-ended structures were excavated (Kirch 1975). These pole and thatch houses had postholes varying in size (diameter), depth, and inclusion of stones in the posthole interior (see Kirch 1975:28, Table 9)<sup>8</sup>. Weisler and Murakami (1991) published data on a late prehistoric uncarbonized post interpreted as a support for a substantial house or other form of substantial structure. The post was of medium diameter (17 cm) and the authors suggest it may have been a corner post, as a possible support stone (upright stone slab) was found at the perimeter of the postmold, "a feature sometimes found in the corner of prehistoric houses" (1991:283). The post wood was identified as mountain apple (*Syzgium malaccense*). This is the first documented use of mountain apple for house posts, a genus which was also used for house rafters, temple enclosures, and religious idols (Kolb and Murakami 1994:67). Weisler and Murakami (1991) posit that this post, or the wood used to fashion it, was perhaps transported up to 20 km, indicating selection of particular wood species for house construction and considerable effort to access these species.

More detailed reporting of house posthole features recovered in Hawaiian excavations is needed to further understand how variation in posthole form and morphology

articulates with site function and social behaviour. Further wood charcoal identification of late prehistoric Hawaiian house posts is warranted, given the archaeological data presented by Weisler and Murakami and data in the ethnohistoric accounts that wood used in house construction was deemed ritually important and may then differ between low and high status residences.

### *New Zealand (Eastern Polynesia)*

Elements of the dwelling structure changed over the course of settlement in New Zealand. At European contact, dwellings were differentiated into two major categories, "common" houses of simple pole and thatch construction, and the more elaborate "superior" houses, constructed from dressed and/or fitted timbers and sometimes elaborately carved (Best 1924:559-561; Prickett 1982:116; Wallace and Irwin 2004). Superior houses could either serve as sleeping houses for elites or their guests (*whare puni*) or as specialized public meeting houses (*whare whakairo*) (Prickett 1982). Both *whare puni* and *whare whakairo* retained central posts in the mid-line which supported the ridge pole. The ethnographic data suggest that the larger superior houses had dressed posts with squared or rectangular ends, while the smaller pole and thatch structures lacked well-finished posts (Prickett 1982:129). The central supporting post of the ridge pole could be embellished with carving or painted designs (Best 1924:571).

In Maori meeting houses, the central posts were not used as seats of honor for high status persons, as visitors to *whare whakairo* seated themselves along the back walls. There is convincing evidence, however, that the center posts as well as the ridge pole retained a sacred or symbolic character in superior houses<sup>9</sup>. The placement of the batten nearest the ridge pole (*a tapu* part of the house) and the adzing of these timbers were completed according to special rules of form; departures from these were evil omens and could cause social chaos (Prickett 1982:115; after Best 1898:130). In the course of constructing new superior houses, stringent social restrictions were followed (Best 1924:561), as the house was considered *tapu* and placed under the care and control over the gods. These practices were not followed when building "simple inferior huts", presumably referring to common pole and thatch houses. Maori legends single out the ridge pole (which was supported by the massive central posts) and they refer to the building of an elaborate meeting house, where the ridge pole was fashioned from *tōtara* (*Podocarpus totara*). Early ethnohistoric sources refer to large and elaborate central house posts which supported the roof weight (Ollivier and Spencer 1985), while later accounts note that central posts were sometimes decorated with red pigment in addition to carved human figures

<sup>8</sup> Postholes also varied in size and morphology at the A1-765 habitation site excavated in the Halawa Valley (Hendron 1975:139), with some having stone-rimmed bottoms and sides. This structure has been interpreted as a pole and thatch dwelling.

<sup>9</sup> Salmond (1975:40) notes how the physical structure of Maori meeting houses represents the body of the ancestor in a quite literal manner; the ridge pole represented the spine of the ancestor, as well as the main line of descent from the founder. This is similar to Tahitian myths where the ridgepole and other posts embodied the human form of the creator god, Ta'aroa.



(Barrat 1979:36; Salmond 1975:37). Sutton (1991:543) and Sahlins (1985:62) have argued that the front central post may represent the *mauri* or life force, defined by Sahlins as "a physical emblem... representing the prestige and stability of the tribal group." In this way, Maori central house posts conform to descriptions of ritual attractors.

New Zealand offers perhaps the most substantive archaeological data for house posts in Eastern Polynesia. Unlike many other areas, prehistoric New Zealand house structures have, for a long time, been exposed in large horizontal excavations which have uncovered posthole patterns. This, coupled with the long history of wood charcoal identification in New Zealand, provides the area with one of the more robust databases for posthole size and morphology and for wood charcoal identifications originating from posthole contexts or from well-preserved post butts<sup>10</sup>.

The archaeological data indicate that central posts differed from others in their size, form, alignment, and emplacement (inferred from objects placed within the posthole). Based on the excavations of a *whare puni* (superior sleeping house), Leach et al.

(1999:34) argued that two of the four central posts were clearly larger than the side posts, perhaps attributable to symbolic and functional reasons. The largest post was aligned to the back wall and had a dog jaw bone placed in the posthole, interpreted as an offering associated with the construction of the house (Leach et al. 1999:94)<sup>11</sup>. Other central posts were specially aligned, had square cross-sections, and were of substantial size and depth, suggesting their symbolic significance. Posts with square to rectangular cross-section have been interpreted as dressed timbers and/or carved posts in other Maori house sites (Bellwood 1978:23-24, Figure 10) and appear to be correlated with

superior houses rather than common houses<sup>12</sup>, supporting Prickett's interpretation of the ethnohistoric accounts.

Posthole size, particularly those of the center posts, clearly varies in New Zealand by house type. Less substantial rectangular dwellings lack squared or rectangular posts and appear to have been fashioned from unshaped poles (Davidson 1984:154). Sutton's Type 1 undefended houses at Puerua (interpreted as high status dwellings and prototypical *whare whakairo*) had systematic and hierarchical differences between the front, center, and side wall posts (1990:188, 1991:543). Central posts either in the front wall or the rear center post were the largest. In contrast, Type 2 houses only sometimes maintained large front central posts

and had more irregular posthole size patterns (1990:191). Taken as a whole, the evidence for central posts being the largest or thickest and having special alignments and/or objects placed as offerings within their postholes, offers firm evidence that the form and morphology of Maori central posts, at least in the well-made superior structures, had both functional and symbolic meaning. Davidson (1984:157) similarly argues that the center

post supporting the ridge pole and nearest to the door had a high (the highest?) degree of symbolism.

Timbers recovered in archaeological excavation of Maori house sites often include *tōtara* (*Podocarpus totara*), but a range of other species have been identified from center posts as well as other house elements (Wallace 1989:223-225). While some variation in New Zealand house post woods reflects environmental diversity and/or local availability, there are tentative suggestions that the woods used differ between the common and superior types and reflect house function and house status. At undefended house sites in Puerua, Type 1 houses 501/1 and 501/2



Figure 2. Native worshipping a post. From Gill 1885; photo courtesy of the Bishop Museum Archives.

<sup>10</sup> However, a search of the New Zealand radiocarbon database (<http://www.waikato.ac.nz/nzcd>) failed to recover many dated posts and wood charcoal identifications from house contexts. Samples with wood charcoal identifications were derived from house walls or wall slabs near post butts or palisade postholes. The exception is NZ7581 deriving from a small house post; the wood charcoal was identified as *tarairi* (*Beilschmiedia tarairi*). Wood charcoal identifications from New Zealand house posts have also been published in other contexts (Irwin 2004; Leach et al. 1999; Sutton 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Davidson (1984:172) also refers to waterworn stones and adzes placed in palisade postholes at Otakanini Pa, which appear to be deliberately placed ritual offerings.

<sup>12</sup> Bellwood (1978:46) notes that posts of Type B, with square or rectangular cross section and tapered bases, were used as palisade posts and house posts.

(interpreted as high status dwellings and prototypical *whare whakairo*), house posts were fashioned from *puriri* (*Vitex lucens*), *porokaiwhiria* (*Cracophyllum* sp.), *koromiko* (*Hebe* sp.), *ponga* (*Cyathea* sp./*Dickinsonia* sp.), *manuka* (*Leptospermum scoparium*), but not *tōtara* (Damm and Sutton 1990:58, Table 3.1)<sup>13</sup>. Yet, in the Makotukutuku structure, interpreted as a prehistoric superior sleeping house, most elements, including the center posts, were fashioned from *tōtara* (*Podocarpus totara*), while one center post was fashioned from *pukatea* (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*) (Leach et al. 1999)<sup>14,15</sup>. At Kohika (Wallace et al. 2004), the center post in the HS area house (interpreted as a carved *whare whakairo*) had a sculpted human figure on the post supporting the ridge pole<sup>16</sup>. Both side wall posts and center posts were sculpted, often with stylized human figures, and they were fashioned from *tōtara*. In contrast, in Area D, interpreted as a locale for pole and thatch houses in addition to dressed plank houses, there was a diverse range of woods for house timbers, these included *pukatea* (*Laurelia novae-zelandiae*), *kauri* (*Agathus australis*), *tōtara* (*Podocarpus totara*), *matai* (*Prumnopitys taxifolia*), *rimu* (*Dacrydium cupressinum*), and *kahikatea* (*Dacrycarpus dacrydioides*) (Wallace et al. 2004:140). Thus, sculpted elements of superior houses typically appear to be fashioned from *tōtara*, while elements of pole and thatch houses and/or dressed timber houses lacking sculpted elements seem to be made from a wider variety of wood types.

## DISCUSSION

This holistic review of ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological data emphatically supports a shared cultural notion of ritual house posts in Polynesia (Table 1), similar to those found in modern Austronesian “house societies”. It is clear that, in the four case studies, house posts served as ritual attractors in domestic contexts; however, the particular ways in which this was embodied or materialized in local contexts differed, as is also found in modern Austronesian “house societies”. Data support the linkage of Polynesian house posts with household ancestors, deities, or spirits in all case studies excepting the Marquesas Islands. In some

locales, house posts were named for particular gods or ancestors. Inorganic and organic materials were poured on or placed at their bases, and the decoration of posts in household rituals was viewed as a form of offering to these deities (in Tikopia, Society Islands, and possibly Hawai‘i)<sup>17</sup> (Table 1).

House posts serving as ritual attractors to which offerings were made and/or as symbols of the gods or ancestors, appear to have been a widespread phenomena in contact-era Polynesia. For example, missionary texts concerning Tuvalu societies (residents of an atoll group situated in Western Polynesia) describe how posts in specialized community houses served as ritual attractors. An engraving found in Gill (1885:15, see Figure 2) entitled “Native Worshipping a Post” depicts a resident of Niutao atoll inside an open-sided round-ended house. The “worshipper” kneels in front of the central side post of the house, offering a “sacred leaflet,” while coconuts have also been placed on the ground at its base as offerings (1885:15, 204). Gill’s text (1885:15) records that this central house post was considered a “god,” more specifically an item within which the god was enshrined (e.g. a ritual attractor), and as such, the post was “an object of daily worship.” Gill’s reference to Narromanga Island likewise refer to posts “sacred to the “shooting star” god. These descriptions of the enshrinement of gods in Tokelauan posts clearly describe posts as ritual attractors in manners similar to the ethnographic and ethnohistoric data already accounted for Tikopia and Eastern Polynesian locales.

The case study also demonstrates metaphoric associations of posts and ancestors in creation myths, where gods descend down the posts and/are transformed and embodied into house posts (in the Society Islands, Tuamotu Islands, and New Zealand). Sometime these relationships are recreated in household rituals (Tikopia). In other locales, such as New Zealand, posts in close association with the ridge pole denoted a sacred space within the house; this was also highly elaborated in Tikopia, the Society Islands, and the Hawaiian Islands, where posts served as backrests for high ranking persons and/or the gods or ancestors which inhabited them<sup>18</sup>. The centrality of house posts in domestic rituals, whether based on ethnohistoric descriptions or archaeo-

<sup>13</sup> Examination of wood charcoal from house posts excavated on the Pouerua Pa also found that house posts were sometimes fashioned from *tōtara* but were also made from a variety of other woods (see Sutton et al. 2003, Appendix 2).

<sup>14</sup> At Makotukutuku carbonized butts of house posts and charcoal from interior posthole fill were identified to species. The fact that the taxa used for the Makotukutuku house posts and other house elements differed from those found in the hearth (i.e. taxa used as firewood) (Leach et al. 1999:99, Table 2) indicates that the woods for house construction were intentionally selected.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson (1984:153) discusses the Moikau house, a twelfth century structure, rectangular in plan, which resembles a well-made sleeping house (*whare puni*) and the Pa Bay houses (1984:155), late nineteenth century *whare puni*. Those superior houses also had posts fashioned from *tōtara*.

<sup>16</sup> Exceptional preservation of wooden artifacts at Kohika allowed for the identification of post timbers rather than charcoal recovered from within the posthole fill.

<sup>17</sup> House posts were also felt to embody the deities in other Oceanic societies, such as Fiji, where kava was poured as offerings at the bases of posts in feasts marking the end of illness (Hocart 1929:61, 191).

<sup>18</sup> Kirch (1994) provides similar evidence for Futuna (Western Polynesia) where house posts demarcated sacred spaces within the paramount chief’s residence. Ethnohistoric evidence for these practices are also found in Easter Island, where posts were sometimes named for ancestors, and were carved with anthropomorphic images. Here, the central post was felt to have “magical” properties (Métraux 1940:197), and house posts functioned as resting places for chiefs (Van Tilburg 1994:73).

logical evidence for offerings put into the posthole, is found in all four case studies. These data clearly support that house posts served as ritual attractors in Eastern Polynesian societies, as they were points of reference around which critical activities were organized (Fox 1993b:14).

Diverse lines of evidence then illustrate that wooden posts served more than functional supports for Polynesian dwellings; they also served as symbols of the ancestors and conveyed information about the social group's rank and status (Table 2). This is perhaps most clear in the Marquesan data, where house posts are described as public displays of domestic wealth and status. Yet, varied material displays of spiritual power, household wealth, or rank are associated with Polynesian house posts (Table 1), these include carving of ancestral figures on posts, adze dressings, intricate lashings with colored cordage, and painting with pigments. These practices are most often referred to in elite contexts, and there is archaeological data from the Society Islands and New Zealand (and suggestions from Hawai'i) that post size, post shape, and post finishing practices varied between elite and commoner dwellings. Interestingly, while Firth's data for Tikopia, classified as simple chiefdom lacking major hierarchy/rank differences, often refers to elite contexts, his overall descriptions suggest that that posts had ritual symbolism in both chiefly and commoner contexts. In contrast, data from New Zealand, the Society Islands, and the Hawaiian Islands typically refer to the elaboration of house posts only in elite residences or sacred, ceremonial contexts. Hence, some of the status differences that we see materialized in these complex chiefdoms may be less formalized in the simpler Tikopian chiefdom, but more archaeological data is needed to test this proposition. What is clear is that house posts formed an important representation of the residential groups' social identity, this could be materialized in the use of sacred woods, or in the carving of ancestral motifs, or a combination of the two. From an archaeological perspective, posthole form and morphology (shape, diameter, depth, objects placed in posthole) provide information on house post size, post decoration or finishing techniques, and post emplacement practices. These data can also be used to reconstruct household ritual practice, site function, and the wealth and status of the house occupants in certain locales.

Ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence suggest that house posts, as displays of the social group's wealth and identity, could be founded in the very wood from which the post was made. In certain Polynesian societies, particular tree species were imbued with divine properties (Kahn 2005; Kolb and Murakami 1994; Orliac 1990). Archaeological data suggest that, in at least the Society Islands, and perhaps the Hawaiian Islands, the woods used to fashion material objects, such as house posts, were chosen not only for their physical properties, but according to the cultural and symbolic value of the wood (Table 2) (see also Kahn 2005; Orliac 1984a, 1984b, 1990). Hence, it is likely that, in certain Polynesian locales, the use of sacred and rare woods in house construction (i.e., as house posts), will reflect as-

pects of household socio-economic status and site function. Specific local patterns will vary and the ethnohistoric data indicate some potential diversity. Use of breadfruit, an economically important and sacred tree, is particularly important for fashioning house posts in Polynesian cultures where arboriculture is prevalent (Society Islands, the Marquesas Islands). It is particularly correlated with high status and/or specialized public houses in these cultures, whose origin myths and first fruit rituals recount how breadfruit symbolized one's relation to a social group, family cohesion, and growth and continuity in the family unit (Ellis 1831; Henry 1928; Ragone 1991). Use of breadfruit wood in high status and/or specialized public houses may have represented a growth metaphor, and perhaps was considered a good omen for the social group's continued access to growth, power, and continuity. In contrast, data from the Hawaiian Islands suggests that using the same wood type for all posts and/or rafters was ritually important, perhaps more significant than the particular woods used. This is clearly different from Marquesan patterns, where ethnohistoric descriptions note how the woods used for house posts differed from those used for ridge poles, and where the end posts, rather than center posts, were signaled out particularly for special carvings or other kinds of finishing treatments.

Finally, both methodological and theoretical issues are foregrounded by the present study. More data are needed from well-excavated house sites in Polynesia where subsurface features are encountered and, in particular, posthole data need to be published in greater detail. Researchers should clearly report not only the particular dimensions of postholes (diameter, size, shape, depth), but all objects found within the posthole contents, as these may relate to post emplacement practices. This requires that care be taken in excavating posthole fill, in order to differentiate stones or other objects within the posthole fill from those relating to exterior deposits. There are also indications that the use of space around posts will differ from other areas of the house, as these features were used as backrests for chiefs or other high status individuals and areas where libations and other offerings were left during household rituals. Offerings of varied organic materials may leave micro-traces discernable with soil chemical residue studies, requiring that comparative soil samples from areas just exterior to postholes be taken. Finally, particular care should be taken to document all the postholes recovered in household excavations, as differences between central posts, often signaled out as the most sacred posts within both Polynesian and other Austronesian houses, versus other house posts (i.e., side posts) may illuminate differences which cannot be detected from small samples alone.

## CONCLUSIONS

Utilizing ethnographic analogy and reading the ethnohistoric accounts through the lens of the "house society" perspective, I have shown that the cultural concept of house posts as sacred items, indeed as ritual attractors, was shared



among many prehistoric Polynesian societies of Austronesian descent. Consonant with my expectations, there appears to have been local changes through time as this concept was adapted to different Polynesian societies in isolation. Because the cultural concept of house posts as ritual attractors was shared across geographical boundaries and is found in both Western Polynesia, Eastern Polynesia, and the Polynesian Outliers, we can identify it as long-standing cultural tradition shared among many, if not all "house" based societies of Oceania.

Posthole size and morphology have traditionally been used in Polynesian archaeology to distinguish temporary use structures/habitations from more substantial, permanently used habitations, and little further attention has been paid to such features. This is reflected in the poor reportage for posthole features in some parts of Polynesia, such as the Hawaiian archipelago and the Marquesas Islands, where basic posthole size, diameter, and morphology is oftentimes not provided in publications. I argue that greater attention should be paid to post size, post morphology, and post wood type because, in many Eastern Polynesian contexts, these data can likely be used to differentiate houses of differing social status and rank from one another, and to pinpoint specialized use sites of a highly sacred nature. This certainly holds true for the Society Islands, but these hypotheses remain to be tested in other areas of Eastern Polynesia. Such data will permit finer comparisons of house architecture and the use of space across Polynesian chiefdoms of varying complexity, critical to addressing larger questions concerning the elaboration of rank and hierarchy systems and their articulation with emerging social complexity.

In the last two decades, inter- and intra-household variability has emerged as an important field of archaeological analysis in Eastern Polynesia (Anderson 2001; Kahn 2003, 2005; Kirch and O'Day 2003; Kirch and Sahlins 1992; Oakes 1994; O'Day 2001; Sutton 1990; Taomia 2000; Van Gilder and Kirch 1997; Walter 1993; Weisler and Kirch 1985). The study of prehistoric households in this region takes many forms and is often articulated with an investigation of status difference and access to material goods and labor. Diverse forms of data are used to investigate diversity between households, including site proxemics, elaboration of surface architecture, analyses of material culture assemblages, the number and type of subsurface features, and presence activity areas. In some dry leeward locales, faunal and marine shell analyses have proven particularly effective for establishing how access to subsistence goods varied among elite and commoner residences (Kirch and O'Day 2003; O'Day 2001; Weisler and Kirch 1985). Because extremely poor bone and shell preservation characterizes most wet windward contexts throughout tropical Eastern Polynesia, more durable material remains (such as postholes) must be used to identify inter- and intra-household variability in these areas. It is likely that in many Eastern Polynesian contexts, detailed documentation of the form and morphology of postholes and

their contents in the field, and later analysis of the woods used to construct late prehistoric Polynesian houses, as preserved in posthole fill, will provide data concerning household socio-economic status and site function. Such studies will follow the current interest in micro-scale analyses which have documented that the study of "lowly" everyday archaeological features, such as postholes, can be an effective means for developing richer behaviour-based interpretations of prehistoric social organization (see Pauketat and Alt 2005).

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